



Secrets and lies

Allegations of libel on the online encyclopedia Wikipedia have led to changes in the way it is edited.

Paul Nesbitt asks if it's a good idea for the service written for the people to be edited by the people

Wikipedia is an internet phenomenon. In the five years since it went online, on 15th January 2001, it has grown into the world's largest encyclopedia. With nearly 850,000 articles it dwarfs such traditional tomes as the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, which has a mere 120,000 entries in its online edition. Wikipedia is the 37th most visited site on the internet, according to web-ranking company Alexa. It's also free, so what's not to like? On the surface, at least, Wikipedia looks like a great idea.

It has become a poster child for the open-source, collaborative way of creating valuable resources for anyone to use, and the fulfilment of some of the early utopian hopes that the internet might become a global repository of all knowledge. Only by surfing Wikipedia will you find such obscure gems as a lengthy entry on John Foxx, the original lead singer of Ultravox, which includes his up-to-date plans.

No other encyclopedia contains so much information. But how much of it is true? How reliable is it? How do we know that the surprisingly detailed entry on the significant role John Foxx played in early electronic pop was not written by the man himself? Wikipedia entries can be made anonymously, after all. On the other hand, is some information, even compromised, better than none at all?

CRACKS IN THE SYSTEM

All these questions and more have surfaced after Wikipedia suffered two high-profile mishaps in the space of a few days late in 2005. First, John Seigenthaler wrote an article for *USA Today* complaining that an article falsely accusing him of involvement in two murder plots was left unamended on Wikipedia for 132 days (see *Newsfile*, page 271).

This incident illuminated the fact that Wikipedia's open model is both its greatest strength and its fatal weakness. With around 1,500 new entries added every day and only one full-time employee, who is paid for by donations, it is impossible even for several thousand volunteer editors to keep track of rogue entries.

In another shocking example earlier in 2005, the Norwegian prime minister, Jens Stoltenberg, was erroneously described on Wikipedia as a convicted paedophile who had been to jail.

A couple of days after the Seigenthaler incident came the high-profile revelation that Adam Curry, the former MTV presenter, was caught editing the Wikipedia entry on podcasting. Curry repeatedly altered the article to remove references to the role of people other than himself in the development of podcasting.



No other encyclopedia contains so much information. But how much of it is true? How reliable is it?

Curry admitted to making the edits, but he claimed that he had made honest mistakes, not having realised the contributions made by others. "So I eat crow, but I wasn't doing anything evil or posting that I had 'done it all', merely participating in the process of Wikipedia to the best of my knowledge. Apparently that's not cool if you were a part of history," he said.

Wikipedia acknowledges that vandalism is its biggest problem because articles can be written by anyone, and are always subject to editing. There are far more people doing this than there are trusted volunteers to monitor changes.

"We have trouble with people posting abusive things over and over and over," admitted Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales. "We block their IP numbers, and they sneak in another way. So we contact the service providers, and they are not very responsive."

As the number of people reading and contributing increases, Wikipedia hopes that the vast number of visitors to the site will spot and eliminate mistakes and deliberate untruths. Seigenthaler's entry was obscure and hardly read by anyone, which is why it "slipped through the gaps", said Wales. But these high-profile gaffes have highlighted what has always been Wikipedia's downside: that it is unreliable as a definitive reference source.

WORK IN PROGRESS

Seigenthaler criticised Wikipedia as a "flawed and irresponsible research tool," and, in notoriously litigious America, several lawyers announced a class action lawsuit on behalf of those "who believe that they have been defamed or who have been the subject of anonymous and malicious postings to the popular online encyclopedia Wikipedia".

While such cases are unlikely to succeed under US law, the pressure led Wales to announce some changes. Wikipedia has stopped allowing anonymous users to create new entries. But while this may hinder the creation of new scurrilous entries, Wikipedia still permits anonymous editing of exiting articles, a concession that Wales said was to protect people in oppressive countries.

"Wikipedia should be thought of as a work in progress. It's our intention to be *Britannica* or better quality, and our policies and everything are designed with that goal in mind. We don't reach that quality yet, we know that. We're a work in progress," said Wales. He warned against students and researchers citing Wikipedia as an authoritative source in their work. But Wales added, "I don't think people should cite *Britannica*, either. The error rate there isn't very good. People shouldn't be citing encyclopedias in the first place," he said.

NATURAL CURIOSITY

Research published by respected science journal *Nature* revealed that Wikipedia wasn't significantly worse than *Britannica*, at least when it came to accuracy in science articles. "An expert-led investigation carried out by *Nature* – the first to use peer review to compare Wikipedia and *Britannica*'s coverage of science – suggests that such high-profile examples of inaccuracy [such as the Seigenthaler case] are the exception rather than the rule," said *Nature*.

"The exercise revealed numerous errors in both encyclopedias, but among 42 entries tested, the difference in accuracy was not particularly great: the average science entry in Wikipedia contained around four inaccuracies; *Britannica*, about three," *Nature* reported.

Nature admitted that its researchers found the results "surprising considering how Wikipedia articles are written. A solar physicist could, for example, work on the entry on the sun, but would have the same status as a contributor without an academic background," it said.

So, is Wikipedia much worse than a traditional encyclopedia? Wales points out that mistakes in printed encyclopedias remain there for years. And, of course, objectivity and accuracy are debatable concepts. Flick through a 1930s entry of the *World Book of Knowledge* and you will read what a great job the Führer is doing in rebuilding Germany.

Perhaps the best approach is to be realistic about what any encyclopedia can offer. "Wikipedia and other encyclopedias should be solid enough to give good, solid background information to inform your studies for a deeper level. And really, it's more reliable to read Wikipedia for background than to read random pages on the internet," said Wales. **CS**